

In the Claims:

Please amend the claims as follows:

1-14. (Cancelled)

15. (Original) A method for financing the acquisition of an asset or service for members of a group, comprising the steps of:

creating a group of associates, each of whom is contractually obligated to make payments on a first periodic basis to a common fund over a specified term in exchange for receiving an award in a contracted amount at some point during the term;

receiving payments from the group of associates; and

on a second periodic basis, identifying at least one associate who is eligible to receive an award, and distributing the award to that associate in an amount essentially equal to the amount contracted by that associate;

wherein the number of associates in the group is x , wherein the average number of payments that an associate in the group is required to make is n , and wherein $x/n > 1$.

16. (Original) The method of claim 15, wherein $x/n \geq 1.5$.

17. (Original) The method of claim 15, wherein $x/n \geq 2$.

18. (Original) The method of claim 15, wherein $2 \leq x/n \leq 3$.

19. (Original) The method of claim 15, wherein the periods of the first and second periodic basis are essentially the same.

20. (Original) The method of claim 19, wherein the periods of the first and second periodic basis is monthly.

21. (Original) The method of claim 15, wherein the number of associates is within the range of about 200 to about 300, and wherein the average number of payments that an associate in the group is required to make is within the range of about 96 to about 120.

22. (Original) A method for financing the acquisition of an asset or service for members of a group, comprising the steps of:

creating a group of associates, each of whom is contractually obligated to make predetermined monthly payments to a common fund over a specified term in exchange for receiving an award in a contracted amount at some point during the term, wherein the number of associates is within the range of about 200 to about 300, and wherein the fixed term is within the range of about 96 to about 120 months;

receiving payments from the group of associates; and

on a monthly basis, identifying at least one associate who is eligible to receive an award, and distributing the award to that associate in an amount essentially equal to the amount contracted by that associate.

23. (Original) The method of claim 22, wherein the fixed term is different for at least two associates in the group.

24. (Original) The method of claim 22, wherein the contracted amount is different for at least two associates in the group.

25. (Original) The method of claim 24, wherein the fund is managed by a first organization, and wherein each associate pays the first organization a fixed percentage of the amount contracted by that associate as a registration fee.

26. (Original) The method of claim 24, wherein the fund is managed by a first organization, wherein the monthly payment made by each associate includes an administrative fee, and wherein the administrative fee is a percentage of the monthly payment increases with the contracted amount.

27. (Original) The method of claim 26, wherein the administrative fee is within the range of about 5.5 to about 7.5% of the monthly payment made by the associate.

28. (Original) The method of claim 22, wherein the monthly payment owed by an associate includes a component which is calculated by dividing the sum of the contracted amount and an actualization factor by the number of months in the term.

29. (Original) The method of claim 28 wherein, on a periodic basis, the contracted amount is increased by applying the actualization factor to the previous contracted amount.

30. (Original) The method of claim 29, wherein the periodic basis is essentially annual, and wherein the actualization factor is within the range of about 1 to about 5% of the contracted amount.

31. (Original) The method of claim 28, wherein the actualization factor reflects the increase in value of the asset or service being procured by the associate.

32. (Original) The method of claim 22, wherein the fund is managed by a first organization which takes out a life insurance policy on each associate, and wherein the monthly payment owed by an associate includes the prorated monthly cost of the life insurance premium.

33. (Original) The method of claim 22, wherein the fund is managed by a first organization which takes out a life insurance policy on each associate, and wherein the monthly payment owed by an associate includes a first component essentially equal to the prorated monthly cost of the life insurance premium, a second component which is essentially equal to the sum of the contracted amount and an actualization factor divided by the number of months in the term, and a third component which is essentially equal to an administrative fee that varies as a function of the contracted amount.

34. (Original) The method of claim 22, wherein the amount contracted by any associate is no more than about three times the amount contracted by any other associate.

35. (Original) The method of claim 22, wherein an associate is eligible to receive an award if the associate is not delinquent in any monthly payments.

36. (Original) The method of claim 22, wherein the distribution of rewards to associates commences no later than four months after the beginning of the term.

37. (Currently Amended) A computer program ~~adapted to implement the method of claim 22, said program being~~ tangibly disposed in a computer readable medium and containing suitable instructions which, when executed, implement the method of claim 22 ~~disposed in a tangible medium.~~

38-58. (Cancelled)

59. (New) The method of claim 15, wherein the recipient of the award is determined through a bidding process.

60. (New) The method of claim 59, wherein the award is given to the associate who agrees to take the award at the largest discount.

61. (New) The method of claim 60, wherein the discount is distributed to the other associates of the group.

62. (New) The method of claim 60, wherein the discount is added to the amount of money awarded to other associates of the group.

63. (New) The method of claim 60, wherein the discount is applied as a credit against payments or fees owed by other associates of the group.

64. (New) The method of claim 15 wherein, if the recipient of the award is in arrears on at least one payment, the amount of any outstanding payments is deducted from the award, along with a penalty fee.

65. (New) The method of claim 65, wherein the penalty fee is distributed among those members of the group who are not in arrears at the time the award is granted.

66. (New) The method of claim 15, wherein members are permitted to withdraw from the group through payment of a penalty which is proportional to the contracted amount.

67. (New) The method of claim 15, wherein the payment of any outstanding payments by a member of the group who receives an award is secured through the grant of a lien on assets purchased with the award.